

North Korean Literature and 'Theoretical Problems of Literary Studies': Tatiana Gabrousseko's *Soldiers on the Cultural Front*

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Tatiana Gabroussenko,

Soldiers on the Cultural Front: Developments in the Early History of North Korean Literature and Literary Policy.
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Abstract

Tatiana Gabroussenko's *Soldiers on the Cultural Front* is the second book in English after 16 years to deal with North Korean literature. Written as a literary history with a strong focus on biography and policy, the study explains that Soviet Stalinist socialist realism was successfully implanted in North Korea from 1945 to 1960. *Soldiers on the Cultural Front*, however, neglects the 'theoretical problems of literary studies.' The consequence is that subjective value-judgments, extra-literary specialization determinism, and naive induction intrude upon the subject matter, reconfirming that North Korean literary studies in English is still not a well-developed or theoretically self-aware field.

Keywords

Criticism, literary history, literary theory, North Korea, reader reception, socialist realism

Introduction

North Korean literary studies in English is not in a good state. Since the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was founded under Soviet Army occupation on 9 September 1948, three years after the United States (US) and Soviet Union liberated colonized Korea from 35 years of Imperial Japanese rule, North Korea has been the subject of numerous monographs focusing heavily on economics, politics, and military affairs. North Korean literature is not yet a field in its own right, seen merely as 'propaganda' and sidelined for more important research. The first English-language journal article on the subject appeared in 1977, with only about eight other articles appearing until 1993 (Kwon, 1990, 1991; Lim, 1988–9; Mackerras, 1984; Myers, 1992; Pihl, 1977; Pucek, 1989; Suh, 1991).

By 1994, 46 years into the existence of North Korea, Brian Myers' *Han Sorya and North Korean Literature* (1994) was published in the United States by the Cornell University East Asia Program. Based on a dissertation written by the young American in his late 20s and submitted at the University of Tübingen in 1992, this was a brash, hasty, and scornful work of literary biography,

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asserting the ‘failure of socialist realism in the DPRK.’¹ The absolute claim did not require a sophisticated theoretical apparatus. North Korean literature was reduced to one canonical writer; his work was declared structurally incompatible with the Soviet classics; therefore, socialist realism failed in North Korea.

Han Sörya and North Korean Literature was the only book-length work of its kind for 16 years, some 14 articles in academic journals appearing during that time (Choi, 1994a, 1994b, 1996; David-West, 2006, 2007, 2009; Epstein, 2002; Fenkl, 2008; Gabroussenko, 2005, 2008, 2009; Hart, 1999; Myers, 2006; Ryang, 2002). In 2010, a second book was released, Tatiana Gabroussenko’s *Soldiers on the Cultural Front*, published by the University of Hawaii Press. A revision of a 2004 dissertation written under North Korea historian Andrei Lankov at Australian National University, the book is also a literary biography, inspired by Myers (1994), but arriving at an opposite conclusion based on archival sources and interviews: the success of socialist realism in North Korea and the adoption and indigenization of Soviet socialist realist conventions.

Theory and Criticism

Despite the major corrective *Soldiers on the Cultural Front* provides over *Han Sörya and North Korean Literature*, Gabroussenko’s work has not really advanced North Korean literary studies in English and least in the area of theory (i.e. poetics). North Korean studies has long been dominated by economists, historians, and political scientists, and their approaches are all too often artificially imposed on the relatively self-contained works of fictional writing called literature. While Gabroussenko does literary biography, a subgenre of literary history (which is concerned with political, social, and intellectual settings; Wellek, 2005: 41), profound limitations in her work arise from a reluctance to engage in literary theory.

‘Since this book largely deals with historical, biographical, and political issues, I do not intend to dwell at length on the theoretical problems of literary studies,’ says Gabroussenko in her introduction (Gabroussenko, 2010: 5). She never does articulate what these ‘theoretical problems’ consist of and, reading *Soldiers on the Cultural Front*, it becomes apparent that Gabroussenko is not fully aware that she is engaging in literary theory, that she is operating with a set of both unconscious and biased theoretical and critical procedures. This problem is compounded by neglect of the available North Korean literary studies scholarship in English, except for Pihl’s 1977 essay and Myers’ 1994 book.

The literary specialist will have general principles, categories, and criteria of literature in mind with the word ‘theory’; description, analysis, characterization, interpretation, and evaluation of concrete literary works with the word ‘criticism’; and knows that ‘no literary history is possible without theoretical assumptions and without criticism’ (Wellek, 2005: 41). Gabroussenko works with a set of assumptions based on what Northrop Frye calls ‘naïve induction’ (see Frye, 2000: 3–29), as well as with a moralizing and deprecating attitude inherited from *Han Sörya and North Korean Literature* and from political scientists Robert A Scalapino and Chong-Sik Lee’s two-volume study of North Korea, *Communism in Korea* (1972).

Scalapino and Lee were not trained in literature and do not do literary criticism, yet Gabroussenko begins her study by approvingly quoting their sweeping generalizations and value-judgments: ‘the cultural life of North Korea (outside the realms of science, technology, and purely folk art) is a great desert of unalleviated mediocrity and monotony’ (Gabroussenko, 2010: 1). This claim is problematized by the fact that it was made a mere 24 years after North Korea was founded, which is not enough time to develop an advanced cultural life.² In addition, the majority of uneducated poor

peasants – with their archaic, folk, and mythical social psychology – were incorporated into the North Korean system.

Surprisingly, for a literary history, *Soldiers on the Cultural Front* never considers the historical sociopsychological factors that condition North Korean literature or how the illiterate peasant masses, whom the Workers' Party of Korea taught how to read, received the new technology of literature (Armstrong, 2003: 149, 242). Reflecting her own tastes, Gabroussenko says, 'North Korean literary texts will hardly inspire the reader who is searching for beauty of language or complexity of character, an original intellectual concept, or a spark of heretical thought' (Gabroussenko, 2010: 1). Socialist realism depicts workers and peasants as masters, and that was an extremely heretical notion in a society emerging from feudalism and colonialism.

Core shortcomings that flow from Gabroussenko's avoidance of 'theoretical problems' are (1) intrusion of subjective value-judgments, (2) neglect of the interaction of text and reader, and (3) reduction of literature to biography. These things are avertable, and major works of literary theory and criticism, including Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957/1973), Wolfgang Iser's *The Act of Reading* (1976/1980), Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* (1981/2010), and Leon Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution* (1923/2005) can inform North Korean literary studies in English and move it beyond the place where Anglo-American literary studies was almost 90 years ago.³

North Korean Socialist Realism

Although *Soldiers on the Cultural Front* proves with evidence from novels, poems, short stories, and travelogs that Soviet socialist realist catchphrases, clichés, cultural images, idioms, motifs, patterns, political symbols, social idylls, tropes, and truisms were adopted in the party-controlled literary culture of North Korea, Gabroussenko does not address the North Korean conception of socialist realism in the formative pre-state years under the Soviet military administration. Rather, she devotes seven pages to the Stalinist doctrine as it developed in the Soviet Union from the 1930s to 1980s, transitioning in 20-year blocks from ascetic/militant to humanistic/romantic to open/subjective.

While it is critical to know that North Korea inherited the socialist realism of the Soviet 1930s and 1940s, Gabroussenko recasts old errors. She says Stalin coined 'socialist realism,' when Ivan Gronsky of the Soviet Writers' Union did so five months before him on 20 May 1932 (Luker, 1988: 18). Next, she says socialist realism was introduced at the First Soviet Writers' Congress in 1934, never mentioning cultural czar Andrei Zhdanov's landmark speech 'Soviet Literature,' edited by Stalin, or the other major speech of the same title by novelist Maxim Gorky (Boterbloem, 2004: 116; Gorky, 2004; Zhdanov, 2004). Finally, she echoes Zhdanov's 1946 line that Lenin's 'Party Organization and Party Literature' (1905) is the source text of socialist realism.⁴

Contrary to Stalinist mythology, 'Party Organization and Party Literature' is not about 'aesthetics,' as Lenin says, but about party documents and the need for party members – especially intellectuals – to commit themselves to the perspective, principles, and program of the working class party (see Eagleton, 2002: 38; Read, 2005: 82). Lenin made the point that the worker's party is not a place for 'literary supermen.' By that, he meant Nietzschean types who put their 'bourgeois-intellectual individualism' first *within* the party and looked down on workers (Lenin, 2001).⁵ Lenin was a student of Karl Kautsky, and here he was repeating the argument that Kautsky made, with direct mention to Nietzsche, in 'The Intellectuals and the Workers' (2004).⁶

Nietzsche's romanticism attracted several party members in the pre-Soviet era, including the influential Gorky,⁷ a co-founder with Zhdanov of socialist realism, and there is an 'element of

Nietzscheanism in Stalinism,' according to Soviet literature scholar Katerina Clark (2000: 152). What are the implications for North Korean socialist realism if its Soviet Stalinist parent has a crypto-Nietzschean component? This is not answerable in *Soldiers on the Cultural Front*. But more problematic is that Gabroussenko gives no attention to Zhdanov's and Gorky's impact, nor to the literary prescriptions of Zhdanovism: party spirit, national spirit, ideological expression, conflictlessness, class spirit, and typicality.⁸

The only academic work in English, to date, that explores Zhdanovism in North Korean literary history is Hyun-Soo Lim's essay 'Soviet Influence on the Literary Control Policy of North Korea, 1946–50' (1988–9). Lim explains that 'Zhdanov's interpretation of socialist realism became the guiding rule of the literary framework of North Korea' and that North Korea 'combined Soviet influence with her indigenous literary tradition' (Lim, 1988–9: 177, 178). This is substantiated with discussion on cultural/literature organizations under the Soviet Army occupation, the nationalistic cultural program, Kim Il Sung's policy statements, adoption of the Soviet anti-cosmopolitan campaign, and North Korean literary works.

Gabroussenko covers the period of 1945 to 1960, but does not cite Lim, and the absence of Zhdanovism is a large hole in her study. As for literary texts, she goes beyond the time period, reading novels, poems, and short stories from the late 1940s to early 1960s, inexplicably bypassing the 1970s and 1980s, and continuing to texts from the 1990s to early 2000s. Such a broad sample of writing warrants comment on the vicissitudes of North Korean socialist realism and its evolution from *Juche* (independent stand or spirit of self-reliance) realism after the Sino-Soviet split in 1961 to 1963 to *Songun* (military-first) realism after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. Unfortunately, there is nothing.

Literary Historical Findings

Han Sorya and North Korean Literature focused on a writer who 'played a decisive role in all major events and policy developments on the Pyongyang literary scene' (Myers, 1994: 1). Gabroussenko displaces Han, a move also counter to official North Korean appraisals. A 1960 issue of *Korean Literature* (*Choson munhak*) reads: 'He is one of the founder[s] of socialistic realism in Korean literature'; 'his creative process amplified socialist realism in literature'; he 'followed faithfully the teachings of Gorky'; and he 'firmly defended *our position* on socialistic realism in literature' (Yun, 1960: 1, 20, 28, emphasis added). The party writer Yi Ki-yöng, whom Gabroussenko writes on, went further: 'Sol-ya is the totality of Korean literature itself' (Yi, 1960: 38).

Notwithstanding the displacement, there are useful findings. Chapter one, at 33 pages, examines four travelogs from 1947, 1952, and 1954 by North Korean writers who toured the Soviet Union: Hong Kón, Kang Hyo-sun, Kim Sun-sök, Min Pyöng-gyun, Yi Ki-yöng, Yi Puk-myöng, Yi T'aejun, and Yun Tu-hön. Apparently, it was through these travelogs that Soviet Stalinist 'social idylls' of the *industrialized paradise*, *agricultural paradise*, *educational and cultural paradise*, and *center and last hope of the world* were appropriated in North Korean literature, which is more sentimental and conflictless than Soviet literature and uses racial caricature for 'Japs,' 'Yankees,' and Western villains.⁹

Chapter two is a 25-page biography of Soviet Korean Cho Ki-Chöñ (1913–51), a Soviet Army officer and poet who was 'a translator of the Soviet [Stalinist] experience for North Korea' and 'one of the earliest creators of the Kim Il Sung cult' (Gabrousseko, 2010: 69). Renowned for his lyrical epic 'Mount Paekdu' (1948), about Kim and the anti-Japanese guerrillas, Cho introduced Soviet form, images, and style to North Korea. He used hyperbole and exaltation, rendered blood-thirsty villains, and permeated his poems with ideology and politics. Politically, Cho was an

emotional, fervent, and intolerant Stalinist. He died in his office in Pyongyang during US bombing in the Korean War (1950–3).

Chapter three is a 34-page biography of Yi Ki-yöng (1895–1984), with only 13 pages, or 38%, devoted to his life and work in North Korea. Yi was a ‘barely educated peasant’ who became a bestseller in the colonial era (Gabrousseko, 2010: 72). He was also a member of the Korean Artists Proletarian Federation (KAPF) until his arrest in 1934. In North Korea, Yi was a high-ranking official and avoided making enemies. Assimilating Soviet writers Gorky and Sholokov, he wrote bucolic, didactic, dualistic, and sentimental works with agrarian nationalist, peasant folkloric, and proletarian motifs, as in his land reform novel *Land* (1948–9). Yi’s work is the ‘core of the North Korean literary canon’ (Gabrousseko, 2010: 71).

Chapter four is a 29-page biography of Yi T’ae-jun (1904–74?),¹⁰ a ‘learned gentleman’ and ‘extoller of pure art’ who went north out of moral support for the poor and oppressed (Gabrousseko, 2010: 105, 116). Yi was a reputed writer in the colonial era and member of the Nine Members Club, a rival of the KAPF. In the north, he sided with the Soviet Korean and Domestic factions, in opposition to the ex-KAPF writers of Kim Il Sung’s guerrilla faction. Yi’s realistic and complex fiction became a ‘propagandistic functionalism’ by 1949 (Gabrousseko, 2010: 121, 122), but after the Domestic faction collapsed in 1953, the formerly praised Yi was denounced as a ‘reactionary’ and erased from official North Korean literary history.

Chapter five is a 33-page overview of party criticism in 1947 to 1960, with its modus operandi of promoting factional/sectarian interests, ‘protecting practical benefits and interests,’ and securing a ‘lucrative place in the official bureaucracy’ (Gabrousseko, 2010: 145, 146, 165). This began with the prohibition of the poetry anthology *Hidden Fragrance* (1946) in 1947; clashes over ‘Mount Paekdu’ in 1948; the attack on the domestic faction and associated writers in 1952 to 1954; and the assault on the Soviet Korean faction in late 1955. In the 1960s, the campaigns waned, and a ‘collective authorship’ system was established.¹¹ Oddly, nothing is said of the effect of the Chinese occupation of North Korea from 1953 to 1958.

Problems of Naïve Induction

Despite Gabroussenko’s findings, there are problems. First, the book title, adopted from a 1946 slogan by Kim Il Sung, is mistranslated. Kim spoke of combatants/fighters (*t’usa*), not soldiers (*kunin*), on the cultural front.¹² There is the additional mistake that the slogan is a ‘variation’ of Stalin’s ‘engineers of the human soul’ (Gabroussenko, 2010: 17). Rather, the link is to the militarization of Soviet cultural life. Stalin spoke of the ‘cultural front’ in 1925, and the Communist Youth League mobilized a ‘cultural army’ with ‘cultural soldiers’ (*kul’tarmeetsy*) in 1928 to combat illiteracy (Fitzpatrick, 2002: 162; Grant, 1995: 84, 180n57; Stalin, 1954b: 165; see also a 1936 reference to “workers on the cultural front” in Stalin, 1978: 159). Mao also spoke of a ‘cultural army’ in 1942.¹³ Kim was a Chinese Communist Party member and officer in the Soviet Army.¹⁴

After the title, one finds that the long descriptive subtitle, *Developments in the Early History of North Korean Literature and Literary Policy*, is misleading and inaccurately reflects the content of the work. Excluding the introduction and conclusion, the study breaks down into subject matter and percentages as follows: chapter one: literary patterns and themes (33 pages, 19%); chapters two to four: profiles of party writers (88 pages, 51%); and chapter five: party criticism (33 pages, 19%). That is, a solid two-thirds center on biography and policy. What is said about literature in this and other sections is not analytic, but general cataloguing in combination with value-judgments.

Frye explains, ‘Naïve induction thinks of literature entirely in terms of the enumerative bibliography of literature: that is, it sees literature as a huge aggregate or miscellaneous pile of discrete

“works” (Frye, 1973: 16). The naive inductive approach takes as data phenomena that are *supposed* to be interpreted (Frye, 1973: 15). In other words, the literary material is not explained in the conceptual framework of literary criticism (Frye, 1973: 15–16). Since literary interpretation and explanation with literary theory and criticism are imperatives in literary history, one has to ask, ‘Might things be better served with a macrohistorical study of North Korean literature and its modes of development, rather than microhistorical biography/politics?’

The longstanding power vacuum in North Korean literary studies in English makes systematic criticism of North Korean literature extremely difficult, and it is likely that other books that will follow *Soldiers on the Cultural Front* in the near future will commit the same error of doing political criticism instead of literary criticism. ‘There being no poetics, the critic is thrown back on *prejudice* derived from his existence as a social being,’ says Frye, prejudice being an ‘inadequate deduction’ and major premise in the mind, submerged like Sigmund Freud’s iceberg (Frye, 1973: 22, emphasis added). That problem occurs in Gabroussenko’s basic equation of ‘North Korean socialist realism’ and ‘North Korean literature.’

Socialist realism is a nationalist and particularist doctrine predicated on Stalin’s 1924 theory of ‘socialism in one country’ and his 1925 axiom ‘proletarian in content, national in form,’ better known as ‘national in form and socialist in content.’ (On the principle of ‘national in form and socialist in content,’ see Stalin, 1954a: 140.) As per Stalin’s emphasis on national identity, all the bureaucratic party-states influenced by Stalinism produced nationally distinctive socialist realisms, for example, Chinese socialist realism (shèhuìzhǔyì xiànshízhǔyì), Cuban socialist realism (realismo socialista), North Korean socialist realism (sahoejuŭijök sashiljuŭi), Soviet socialist realism (sotsialisticheskii realizm), and Vietnamese socialist realism (chủ nghĩa hiện thực xã hội chủ nghĩa).

Socialist realism, however, is *not* a literature or a style. This statement is counterintuitive because the Stalinist party makes literary policy and controls the press. Socialist realism is a ‘basic method’ of writing and criticizing literature according to the party line. Style is ‘weapons’ in socialist realism, and style, like firearms, explosives, and armored vehicles, is subordinated to tactics (Zhdanov, 2004). A set of approved style weapons dominates at a given time, and different genres appear within the style sets. Some of these genres in North Korea are biographical novel, folktale, graphic novel, historical novel, illustrated storybook, national opera, reminiscence, and revolutionary opera. There are also hybrid genres.¹⁵

Phenomenology of Reading

Gabroussenko’s contempt for North Korean literature allows her to make unscholarly value claims on things she does not investigate in *Soldiers on the Cultural Front*. North Korean writers have ‘produced writings of dull images, stereotyped storylines, and lifeless language,’ she declares in the conclusion. Bizarrely and illogically, it is added that a ‘near-complete absence of readership attention to these writings in South Korea [...] may serve as *proof* of this literature’s artistic deficiencies’ (Gabroussenko, 2010: 174; emphasis added).¹⁶ Lastly, she speaks of the ‘long-suffering North Korean reader’ deprived of education, entertainment, and hope in the national literature. This is the language of a moralizer, not a literary historian.

There are, as it turns out, two passing instances in the first third of Gabroussenko’s study that contradict her moralizing claims about North Korean readers. She writes that ‘many young people praised the poem [‘Mount Paekdu’ by Cho Ki-chon in 1948],’ and there was ‘public interest in the poem’ (Gabroussenko, 2010: 59; emphasis added). Apart from this, *Soldiers on the Cultural Front* makes no attempt to engage in the history of reader reception among the masses of North Korean

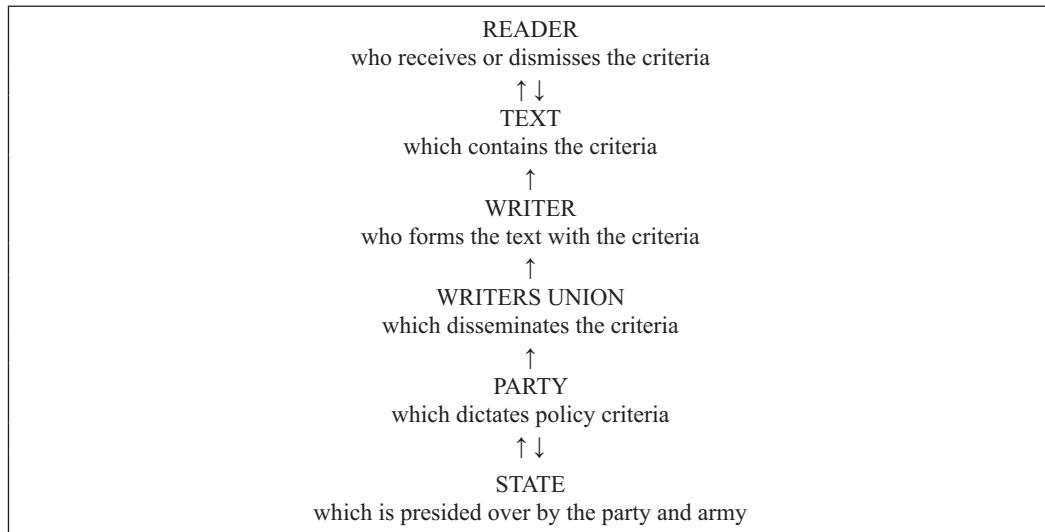


Figure 1. North Korean party-military-state authority, literature production, and reader reception

peasants, workers, and youth. The focus is on party policy, party writers, and party critics. Since the Workers' Party of Korea was not simply making literary policy for itself, but to influence people, regular readers require attention in a literary history.

Stephen Epstein, the one scholar, to date, who has written a work of strict *literary* criticism in North Korean literary studies in English, points out that the phenomenology of reading in North Korea is unknown: '[H]ow do real North Korean readers choose to understand their fiction within the privacy of their thoughts? That, I fear, is a question whose answer may be several years coming' (Epstein, 2002: 49). This statement was made in 2002, and that is where things still stand. Needless to say, the easiest way to solve the problem is for one to live in North Korea for a few years, observe the reading culture, and conduct interviews with random readers. But this is not yet an option for most foreign researchers.

Despite the prohibitive security situation in North Korea, it is possible for scholars to infer from injunctions and instructions in the speeches of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il that, at different times in North Korean history, there have been people (party writers and lay readers) who found party-controlled literature uninteresting and not worth reading (Kim, 1972; Kim, 1995, 1997). Simultaneously, there is eyewitness and defector testimony suggesting that regular North Koreans have a strong demand for and even become emotionally involved in the national forms of literary/cultural production (Oh and Hassig, 2000: 37; Ryang, 2002: 22–23). Scrutiny of these sources indicates a reading culture on the ground that is *both* receptive and dismissive towards approved literature.

The more objective parts of *Soldiers on the Cultural Front* tend to confirm the hypothesis of coexistence concerning receptive and dismissive reader reception in North Korea. These are the parts on youth and public interest in Cho's didactic heroic poem about Kim Il Sung in 1948, and there is the chapter on the failed party writer Yi T'ae-jun, who can be seen as a dismissive reader. Relevant here is the now-known fact that average North Koreans are politically disengaged and try to ignore the noise of party rhetoric as much as they can in their day-to-day life (Oh and Hassig, 2000: 34, 37, 2009: 133). That social psychological reality in the context of the reception of North Korean literature and its policy criteria is approximated by the reviewer in Figure 1.

North Koreans apparently do read state socialist realist literature separately from policy criteria, such as party spirit, national spirit, and ideological expression.¹⁷ There are things that happen in the complex psychological process of reading, as well as structural factors in the work of literature itself, that can override the intentions of the writer and the meta-author, the party and state writing through the writer (see David-West, 2009). What these processes and factors are will depend from reader to reader and from work to work.¹⁸ But there will be shared conventions of reading and things readers will enjoy or dislike collectively, and that must be borne in mind when North Korean reader reception is considered in literary history.

Necessity of Literary Theory

The aforementioned problems of naive induction and the phenomenology of reading make it abundantly clear that North Korean literary studies in English, as represented by the second book in English to appear after a hiatus of 16 years, is in need of a self-conscious literary method. The methods of economics, political science, and social science are insufficient for literature and inadequate for literary history and its subgenre literary biography, which presuppose *literary theory* and *literary criticism*. *Soldiers on the Cultural Front* is a confirmation that the ‘theoretical problems of literary studies’ cannot be ignored if one wants to investigate the history of North Korean literature.

Earlier, five major works of literary theory and criticism were mentioned. How are they helpful? Ashcroft et al.’s *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) enables critical understanding of North Korean literature as ‘post-colonial literature,’ a concept missing in Gabroussenko’s study. Korea was a colony of Japan from 1910 to 1945, and during the Korean War of 1950 to 1953, North Korea was invaded, occupied, and leveled by the United States Armed Forces. North Korean literature is historically conditioned by the imperial process, a hybrid that reacts to the experience of colonization, and is a national, regional, political assertion of difference against imperial power and foreign domination (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 1989).

Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957/1973) informs North Korean literary studies to get rid of value-judgments and specialization determinism, twin functions of the latter being ‘naive induction’ and the ‘myopia of specialization,’ which derive from non-literary methods. Literary criticism becomes scientific by doing an inductive survey of the literary field; seeing literature as an ‘order of words’ and ‘autonomous verbal structure;’ presuming literary phenomena as part of a totally coherent whole; and accepting literary data and its values as they are, not reacting against them. The images in literature, even North Korean literature, are neither true nor false, for literary meaning is hypothetical (Frye, 1973).

Wolfgang Iser’s *The Act of Reading* (1976/1980) explains that there is a dynamic interaction between text and reader, a principle not understood in *Soldiers on the Cultural Front*. North Korean literature activates associations and aesthetic responses in North Koreans and non-North Koreans that are dissimilar. The literary work reformulates a ‘formulated reality’ and will communicate differently to the implied/insider and unimplied/outsider reader, who have different experiences with literature under different social, historical, and cultural conditions. Reception, meaning, and significance *within* the community of North Korean readers are thus integral to historical research on the national literature (Iser, 1980; see also Iser, 1978).

Fredric Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious* (1981/2010) offers the interpretative strategy of reading North Korean literature as a ‘symbolic mediation on the destiny of community.’ The literary text is a medium between the ruling group and masses of people, embodying the survival interests of the party-military caste, its ‘will to domination,’ and its trajectory of future historical

development. This literature consists of hegemonic works with ideological and instrumental functions that produce false consciousness, reaffirm legitimizing strategies, promote collective solidarity, and narratively organize collective consciousness against external threats in order to perpetuate power and privilege (Jameson, 2010).

Leon Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution* (1923/2005) posits that art has its own way, means, and laws incompatible with party command. This perspective sees the North Korean socialist realist policy of party-oriented, people-oriented literature as a 'reactionary populism' that dangerously compresses the future in the present, falsifying perspectives, violating proportions, distorting standards, and cultivating small-circle arrogance. On the other hand, in the objective historical process, art is a servant in society and utilitarian in history, requiring study of the social roots and sources of North Korean literature: order of feelings, social conditions, place in history, literary heritage, and historical impulses (Trotsky, 2005; see also Trotsky, 2004).

Conclusion

Tatiana Gabroussenko's *Soldiers on the Cultural Front* has neither solved nor overcome the problem of extra-literary specialization determinism that limits North Korean literary studies in English, but what is of essential value in the study consists of the following: it disproves the misconception that socialist realism failed in North Korea; it provides accessible author profiles; it reveals that the ascetic/militant socialist realism of the Soviet Stalinist 1930s and 1940s is the assimilated tradition in North Korea; it relates that North Korean literature is more nationalistic, folktale-like, and sentimental than Soviet Stalinist literature; and it tells that the successful North Korean writer consents to party authority.

Still, there is the fact that all of this is coming *62 years after* the founding of North Korea and *16 years after* the first Western literary biography about North Korean literature. Things have been moving too slowly, though what really compromises *Soldiers on the Cultural Front* is that Gabroussenko gives short shrift to the 'theoretical problems of literary studies,' thereby blinding herself to the biases, prejudices, and specialization determinism she imposes on the subject matter. What is more is that, even though she proves that socialist realism was successful in North Korea, she cannot bring herself to state that the previous work on the subject was heavy-handed and Soviet Russocentric.

North Korean literary studies in English still has a way to go in appreciating and really becoming self-aware of the 'theoretical problems of literary studies.' The conditions of literature are not simply mirrored in literature, and there is no literary history or literary biography without literary theory. Complex processes are involved in the production, distribution, reception, and life of the literary text, even in an authoritarian situation. Here, too, the starting point for a theoretically informed literary historical analysis is the development of literature as what it is and the establishment of literary period, with the conventions, norms, and standards that predominate, by corresponding literary criteria (see Wellek and Warren, 1984a; Wellek and Warren, 1984b; see also Nünning, 2001).

Notes

1. Other reviewers have said, 'I see socialist realism abundantly present in North Korean literature: North Korean writers still advocate socialist realism. Myers simply does not interpret socialist realism as they do,' and 'his scorn for much of the work he examines is readily palpable' (see Choi, 1995; Epstein, 2003).
2. British critic Herbert Read observed in the 1940s, 'It is now nearly 30 years since the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics was established, and *30 years is admittedly not sufficient time* in which to build up a

new culture,' the problem being compounded by the Stalinist 'imposition of an intellectually predetermined conception of what art *should be* in a socialist community' (see Read, 1970: 128–129, emphasis added).

3. This is not hyperbole. René Wellek observes that 'unreflective literary history' and 'boastful empiricism' were characteristics of literary studies in the United States in 1927 and in the work of British literary critic FR Leavis in 1937. Wellek responded by coauthoring *Theory of Literature* with Austin Warren in 1949 (Wellek, 2005: 50).
4. Zhdanov, with Stalin's approval, exploited Lenin's 1905 speech in the infamous 'Report on the Journals *Zvezda* [Star] and *Leningrad*' (see Zhdanov, 1950: 37–38).
5. The Nitzschean superman (*Übermensch*) is a 'higher man' of the future, who replaces God, who surpasses 'man,' and to whom 'man' is a 'laughing-stock, a shame,' and a 'worm.' Superman arises from a 'chosen people' and stands above the 'petty people' and 'populace-mishmash' (see Nietzsche, 2010).
6. 'Nietzsche's philosophy with its cult of superman for whom the fulfillment of his own individuality is everything and the subordination of the individual to a great social aim is as vulgar as it is despicable, this philosophy is the real philosophy of the intellectual; and it renders him totally unfit to participate in the class struggle of the proletariat' (Kautsky, 2004).
7. 'I like Nietzsche,' said Gorky in 1897. By the Stalinist 1930s, however, Gorky excoriated the German Romantic philosopher as 'sick Friedrich Nietzsche,' linking his 'bourgeois yearning for a "strong man"' and conception of the 'blond beast' with fascist leaders Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini (see Gorky, 1939: 161, 181, 199; 1997: 27; see also Clowes, 1987).
8. On Zhdanovism, see Luker, 1988; Morawski, 1974; and Solomon, 1974; see also David-West, 2007. On the understanding of socialist realism in 1934 and the centrality it gives to folklore, see Robin, 1992.
9. Gabrousseko describes this as 'racism,' though she never defines the term or examines how North Korean sources understand it. She also says racial caricature of villains in North Korean literature achieved a level that was 'unimaginable' in the multinational Soviet Union (2010: 41). The claim lacks textual support and is untenable in view of Gabroussenko's subsequent reference to anti-Korean laws, ethnic discrimination, forced resettlements, and 'unreliable' nationalities in the Soviet Stalinist 1930s (pp. 50, 51, 68). Soviet studies historians such as Hiroaki Kuromiya (2007), Norman M Naimark (2010), and Vadim Z Rogovin (2009) have confirmed the existence of ethnic purges, forced resettlements, and genocide of national minorities in the Soviet Union under Stalin.
10. Gabroussenko initially lists the dates '1904–1969,' but later says Yi was purged and exiled to Kangwondo in 1974 (pp. 72, 131).
11. Gabroussenko, 2010: 165. Collective authorship is also called the 'brigade method' and was introduced to prevent 'individual political mistakes' in writing (p. 28).
12. See Kim 1972: 1–5. The original Soviet Army-approved speech appears in Korean as 'Munhwaindūl-ŭn munhwa chōnsōn-ŭi t'usa-ro doeoya handa,' literally, 'Culture People Should Be Fighters on the Culture Front,' and was delivered on 24 May 1946 to a meeting of People's Committee propagandists, political parties, social organizations, cultural workers, and artists. One should note that the Soviet Stalinist phrase 'combatants on the cultural front' was also used in Mao Zedong's China and Ho Chi Minh's Vietnam.
13. Mao, 1992: 57, 59. When Maoist China launched its anti-illiteracy campaign in 1956, the militaristic strategy and vocabulary of the Soviet Stalinist 1920s was copied directly. See Peterson, 1997: 87–89.
14. Kim Il Sung joined the Chinese Communist Party in 1931, fought as a guerrilla leader throughout the 1930s, moved to the Soviet Union in October 1940, and arrived in northern Korea on 19 September 1945, as a warrant officer in the Soviet Army. See Yonhap News Agency, 2003: 841.
15. For example, North Korean historical novels in the *Immortal History* (Pulmyōl-ŭi yoksa) series, a 15-volume saga about leader Kim Il Sung, overlap with the heroic epic. On the world of the epic, see Bakhtin, 1996. See also de Vries, 1988, and Pihl, 2003.
16. The claim about an absent South Korean readership cannot be accepted at face value. No sources are cited, and no supporting evidence is provided. Since the historic inter-Korean summit of 13 to 15 June 2000, there have been literary exchanges between the two Koreas, and South Korean scholarship on

North Korean literature is prolific and industrious. Moreover, Hong Sök-chung's *Hwang Chin-i* (2002), a North Korean historical novel, won the 2004 Manhae Prize for Literature in South Korea and was adapted as the South Korean film of the same name in 2007.

17. University of Iowa professor Sonia Ryang, who grew up in the North Korean community in Japan and visited North Korea three times from 1981 to 1985, says, '[O]rdinary citizens craved fiction, stories, and any other form of written *entertainment*.' She adds, 'In P'yongyang, people read everywhere: in the railway station, in the train, in the park, and on the riverbank.' The observed individuals appeared to be 'reading novels *primarily for fun*,' in her estimation. See Ryang, 2002: 22–23, emphasis added.
18. Researchers interested in empirical and quantitative analysis of North Korean reader response should consult Bourtolussi and Dixon, 2003. See also Dixon and Bortolussi, 2001.

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